

FROM PRISON TO PRAISE ACTS 5.17-42

For several months now, on Wed. nights, we have been studying the book of Acts, the 5th book in the New Testament – the story of the birth of the church and of the struggles and successes the first church went through in the process of growing.

The story begins in **Chapter 1** with Jesus' renewal of the Great Commission in Acts 1.8 followed by His ascension to the right hand of the Father.

In **Chapter 2**, the church experienced the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and the miracle of speaking in languages they had not previously learned. Following that **miracle** of birth, Peter preached a **message** and gave an invitation. The Holy Spirit **moved** and 3000 souls were saved.

In **Chapter 3**, we see the continuation of the pattern. The chapter begins with a **miracle** – the healing of the lame man, a **message** by Peter, and a **movement** of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of listeners as the number of men in the church grew to over 5000.

The difference is that, following this event, we saw the beginning of the persecution of the church as Peter and John were arrested by the Jewish leadership. You can read about their arrest in **Chapter 4**. They were commanded by the Jewish court – the Sanhedrin – to cease preaching in the name of Jesus – something that the apostles knew they could not do.

Acts 4:19 But Peter and John answered and said unto them, Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto (to listen to) you more than unto God, judge ye (you be the judges). 20 For we cannot but speak (we do not have within us the ability not to speak) the things which we have seen and heard.

They were eventually set free after the hearing before the Sanhedrin without any punishment, yet they knew that things had begun to change in their relationship with their own nation of Israel.

The apostles continued to trust in the leadership and the divine power of God and, upon their release, joined the rest of the church in praising the person and the power and the authority of God and in prayer. In their prayer...

- They underscored **the sovereign hand of God** in all of the events that ever take place on the earth and in the lives of men.
- They praised the fact that all that had happened in the **death and crucifixion of Christ** was simply men carrying out God's perfect and predestined will by the exercise of their free will.
- They **did not pray that God would punish** those who had falsely arrested them and threatened them.
- They **did not pray to be protected** from future arrests or even from harm.
- They prayed that **God would give them boldness** to proclaim the word of God, even in the face of such opposition and threats to their security and their lives.

Even though the church had grown by leaps and bounds over a few short days (Remember that the number of men was over 5000. Considering women and children, the number of members could have been over 20000!), there was a unity among the membership such as had never been seen before.

They had virtually eliminated poverty among the membership by the voluntary benevolence of those who had much for the sake of those who had little or nothing.

In **Chapter 5**, things begin to change. We see the first fracture in the solidarity of the church by the deception of Ananias and Sapphira who lied to Peter, the church, and to God himself by keeping back money that they had pledged to give.

In a plan similar to our Faith Promise Offering or tithing commitments, they pledged their financial support for a specified amount, then reneged on that commitment because they wanted to spend the money on their own personal needs and wants.

And God killed them for it.

Yet even out of something as negative as that was, God made something good.

Remember that the disciples had prayed that God would give them boldness to proclaim the word of God, even in the face of persecution. And God answered them immediately. They continued to proclaim the message of the resurrection of Christ in the Temple and in the city.

The effects were remarkable – some great and some not so pleasant to enjoy – but all resulting in God getting glory and the church experiencing growth.

THE PRODUCTS OF PROCLAMATION:

I. Power

Acts 4.30 says that the apostles preached with great power the resurrection of Christ from the dead. This was the theme of their message. Their message was not just about how to find peace in God or how to solve your financial problems or about God meeting your felt needs or about building self esteem among men.

The message proclaimed by the apostles throughout the New Testament was not just the benefits that man would receive from knowing Christ, but the fact that Christ, the Son of God, had risen from the dead and had taken His rightful place at the right hand of the Father – that God is the center of all that happens in the world.

Matt. 6:33

- **Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness** – Seek out the pleasure of the glory of God and delight in the person of Christ above every other aspect of your life, including your family, your finances, your fun.
- **and all these things shall be added to you** – You will find personal satisfaction that you will find nowhere else in this world to a degree that you cannot imagine until you experience it.

Such power was released through the preaching and the faithfulness of the apostles that multitudes were healed, simply by having the shadow of the apostles pass over the sick.

A shadow is not an integral part of a person, but is cast by the light that is shining on them. God shined the light of His glory and authority on Peter and the other apostles, and the shadow that was created by God's light carried God's power to the sick and afflicted. The apostles realized that the healing took place because of the power of God. And so did the church as a whole.

Romans 1:16 *I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth...*

Notice what that verse said and what was demonstrated in the life of the early church. God did not just zap people with salvation and healing. Those things – the power of God unto salvation – came as a result of the proclamation of the word. Where there is no proclamation there is no power – not because we have power to prohibit God from acting. The proclamation of the word is simply the method through which God has chosen to release His power.

II. Purity

Following God's judgment on Ananias and Sapphira, the Bible says that there was an increase of fear of the Lord among the people.

1. Those who were already **believers** experienced an increase of awe and reverence for God, and I assume an increased sense of integrity.

The judgment against one couple sent a shock wave of fear and respect for the power of God that had not been seen in Israel since the death of Achan's family following his disobedience to God after the defeat of Jericho.

Here was a warning from God that He is serious – deadly serious – about the work of His church and that He will not continue to stand for **disobedience** and **dishonesty** among His chosen people or **dishonor** to His own name.

2. Those who were **non-believers** did not dare join themselves to the church for fear of God's judgment.

They may not come to a saving knowledge of Christ, but they recognized His power and gave God glory as a result.

3. Those who were **being saved** and added to the church continued to increase to the point that Luke lost count of how many there were. (v. 14)

The apostles – meaning all of the twelve, not just Peter and John – continued to preach and to heal the sick and those plagued by evil spirits. Their obedience to the call of God led to an increased wrath among the Jewish leadership, which led to the third result of proclamation...

III. Persecution/Prison (v. 17)

The proclamation of the word of God by the apostles released the power of God unto salvation in the hearts of unbelievers, but it also released a power of indignation in the hearts of the Jewish leadership.

The impudence of the apostles and their bold and public display of disobedience to the direct command of the Sanhedrin caused them great indignation – it lit a fire of jealousy and envy and rivalry that created such wrath that it could scarcely be controlled.

All twelve men were arrested and put into a public prison – not just a holding cell as before, but a place which housed murderers and thieves and other criminals.

Yet once again, God demonstrated that He was in control, not the Sanhedrin.

An angel of the Lord unlocked the door to the jail where they were imprisoned and set them free. He did so without the Sanhedrin knowing it and without the Temple police knowing it.

It seems that momentarily, God worked a reverse miracle and made seeing eyes blind and hearing ears deaf because the angel set the apostles free without the guards knowing it, and it

seems that even the other prisoners were not aware of it since there is no record of a mass escape, just a great escape.

The angel did not set them free from suffering and persecution. He set them free to continue to serve the God of glory and to proclaim the **words of this life** (v. 20) – capitalized in some translations to call attention to the message of eternal life that is the gift of God to all who believe.

They returned to the Temple to preach, but their freedom did not last long. They were arrested once again and brought before the Sanhedrin.

Most members of the council were so angered by the events of the day that there was a very vocal sentiment expressed that the only way to defeat this movement was to kill all of the apostles.

However, after the testimony of Peter and the counsel of a member of the Sanhedrin named Gamaliel (a rabbi whose most famous student was Saul of Tarsus), the Sanhedrin realized that they had no power to stop such a movement as that which they were witnessing in the formation of the church.

They realized that their authority was being undermined and that there was little they could do about it. So they once again backed down.

This time, they had the apostles flogged – all twelve of them, including their newest member, Matthias. They renewed their commandment not to preach in the name of Jesus and set the apostles free.

But not before we see another effect of proclamation of the Gospel...

IV. Persistence

Remember that Jesus had promised that the Apostles did not need to worry about what they would say when they were arrested and brought before the authorities. The Holy Spirit would give them the words to say.

Now Peter stood before the Sanhedrin and, on behalf of the apostles and the church, took advantage of the situation before

him and boldly proclaimed the message of God, making one of the most important statements of faith in the Scripture.

1. Professed his faith in Christ (v. 29)

This won't be the last time a Christian takes such a stand before authorities at the risk of their lives.

Polycarp, burned by Rome for failing to worship the gods of Rome:

Eighty and six years have I now served Christ, and he has never done me the least wrong: How then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?

John Huss, burned by the Catholic Church for his reformation doctrine:

I call God to witness that all that I have written and preached has been with the view of rescuing souls from sin and perdition; and, therefore, most joyfully will I confirm with my blood that truth which I have written and preached.

Martin Luther at his trial for heresy against the Catholic Church:

I cannot and will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. Here I stand, I can do no other, so help me God. Amen.

2. Pointed out the sin of the Jewish leadership. (v. 30)

Peter very boldly accused the Sanhedrin of their guilt in the crucifixion of Christ.

He had already made this accusation before in **2.23** and **4.10**.

So he is being persistent in his stand before them.

Yet the persistency I want us to see this morning is that of God in appealing to these leaders of His chosen people to surrender their wills to the call of Christ.

3. Proclaimed the gospel message. (v. 31)

Peter spoke briefly yet clearly about God's call to repentance and His offer of forgiveness of sins, yet these men could not get past their own guilt.

In **v. 38**, the message given by Peter "cut them to the heart." It did not pierce their hearts because they had been hardened to the point that they were made of stone instead of flesh.

They were angered to the point of calling for the death of all the apostles, but they were not a unified body. Among them were men like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea and others whose hearts had already been converted by the gospel message.

(v. 6.7)

And then Gamaliel stood to give the wisest counsel of the day from among the council of the Sanhedrin.

After recounting two examples of earlier cases where the leaders had failed to bring about a general revolt among the people and whose followers had dispersed after the leaders' deaths, Gamaliel, calm and rational and of even temperament, said...

(v. 38-39)

While it is true that the Bible is its own best commentary, here in these verses is some justification for taking advantage of the commentaries and word studies written by men as we seek to understand and to interpret God's word.

In these two verses, Gamaliel used the propositional word "if" on two occasions, yet the meaning of the word is not the same in both places and has no direct English translation.

In **v. 38**, Gamaliel says, "If the purpose or activity of these men is of human origin, it will fail." He is saying that there is a possibility that the works of the apostles are simply the works of men.

In **v. 39**, Gamaliel says, "However, if it be of God, you cannot win (notice how he separated himself from the radical mood of the assembly), and may even find yourself fighting against God."

In this second use of the word, Gamaliel is basically saying, "It is my intellectual and professional opinion that these men are not representing themselves but are actually speaking the word of God."

The last part of verse 39 is actually a stand-alone sentence – a severe warning of God through Gamaliel to the Jewish

leadership – very similar to that proclaimed by the prophet Abijah to King Jeroboam...

2 Chron. 13:12 *O children of Israel, do not fight against the LORD God of your fathers, for you shall not prosper!*

Prov. 21:30 *There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD.* (NIV)

There is no indication that Gamaliel himself ever came to acknowledge the lordship of Christ, yet his message to the Sanhedrin paved the way for the continued proclamation of the message.

We have seen four effects of the proclamation of the Gospel message: Power, Purity, Persecution, and Persistence.

Now we come to the last effect of the proclamation of the Gospel...

V. Praise (v. 41-42)

(Read v. 41 only.)

The Sanhedrin could not just let the apostles go free without making a statement, so they had the twelve flogged. This marked them officially and physically as criminals of the state.

In spite of it all, the apostles left the council meeting praising God for the privilege of persecution.

Perhaps their minds were refreshed by the Holy Spirit so that they recalled the teachings of the Messiah in the Sermon on the Mount...

Matt. 5:10 *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

11 *Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.*

12 *Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

How blessed they were to be counted among those who had suffered for the message of God over the previous generations – and now to be able to suffer for His Name.

Once again, some translations capitalize the word “name” to call attention to what is said in the last verse of the chapter.

(V. 42)

The primary mission of the church is not...

4. To fight against social injustice
5. To instill character in our students
6. To eliminate poverty in our nation or the world
7. To make men comfortable in peace

The primary mission of the church is to be faithful in our proclamation of Jesus Christ.

When we get so caught up in all those good missions in the world, we tend to forget the primary mission of proclaiming the name of Jesus.

No wonder we have so little impact on our community and our world.

Matt. 6:33 *Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you* (shall be accomplished because a heart that is right with God will also be right with man and the world.)

The proclamation of the Gospel will result in the release of God's power unto salvation as well as an increase of purity within the community.

It will always be accompanied by persecution or even prison or death.

But our persistence in its proclamation will always lead ultimately to praise.